



# Listeriosis – A Food-borne Illness

## Health Education Facts

*Listeriosis is a food-borne illness caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. Although it may cause only a few or no symptoms in healthy people, it can cause serious illness in people with immune system problems, the elderly and pregnant women.*

### How is Listeriosis Spread?

People get listeriosis by eating food contaminated with the bacteria *L. monocytogenes*. Some types of soft cheeses, undercooked poultry, hot dogs not thoroughly reheated, foods from deli counters, and other ready-to-eat foods are responsible for most reported cases. There have been a few cases of farm workers and veterinarians who have gotten it from animals, but this is not common.

### What are the Symptoms?

Healthy people with listeriosis may not have noticeable symptoms. For others, symptoms include fever, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Listeriosis, if left untreated, can lead to meningitis (brain infection) and bacteria in the bloodstream. Pregnant women may develop flu-like symptoms with complications resulting in miscarriage, stillbirth, or meningitis in their newborn baby. In older children and adults, listeriosis may attack the central nervous system and bloodstream, causing pneumonia and inflammation of the lining of the heart and valves. Abscesses or skin lesions may also appear. Although flu-like symptoms may occur 12 hours after eating contaminated food, it usually takes from one to six weeks for a serious case of listeriosis to develop. The time it takes for symptoms to appear depends on the person's age and general health, the strain of *L. monocytogenes*, and how much bacteria was eaten.

### How Can Listeriosis be Prevented?

Although most people are at very low risk for listeriosis, the risk of this and other food-borne illnesses can be reduced by following the tips listed below:

- C Keep raw and cooked foods separate when shopping, preparing, cooking, and storing foods. Bacteria in juices from raw meat, poultry, and fish can contaminate cooked food.
- C Wash your hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
- C Wash raw vegetables well before eating them.
- C Thoroughly cook meats, poultry, eggs, and fish.
- C Read and follow directions on foods to keep them properly refrigerated. Do not use foods after their expiration date.
- C Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Do not keep them unrefrigerated longer than two hours.
- C Place leftovers in shallow, covered containers and refrigerated them immediately.
- C Keep your refrigerator clean, and keep the temperature in it between 34 and 40° F.

Pregnant women, the elderly, and people who have weakened immune systems can reduce their risk by following the tips below:

- C Avoid soft cheeses such as Mexican style (soft, white ethnic cheeses), feta, Brie, Camembert, and blue cheese. There is no need to avoid hard cheeses, processed slices, cottage cheese, or yogurt.
- C Reheat leftover foods and ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs thoroughly until they are steaming hot.
- C Although the risk of listeriosis from deli counter food is relatively low, avoid these foods and thoroughly reheat cold cuts before eating them.

- C Avoid using or drinking unpasteurized milk.